INTERVIEW VI

DATE: August 17, 1972

INTERVIEWEE: J. J.(JAKE) PICKLE

INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

PLACE: Congressman Pickle's office, Cannon Building, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

F: Let's start this by talking about your encounter with civil rights up here.

P: The Civil Rights Act of 1964 is generally classified as the granddaddy of all civil rights bills. They had had one before that in 1958 and others that followed, but that was the real breakthrough because that was the question of "accommodations." Did a black person or any minority person have the right to eat or to sleep or to stop at the service stations or go to theaters or enter businesses or do any other things that any other American could? Was that a basic inalienable right?

Well, the bill came up in 1964. Having been elected in the special election in December, at the beginning of 1964 the civil rights bill was pending, and it was the first major legislative item. It came up in February. I remember we debated it for one entire week, besides the preliminaries and the buildups and the insertions in the Record and the debates in the public press. We started on Monday and I don't believe we finished that bill until late Friday night.

I campaigned on the basis that I thought it was better to let the local communities, my state and my own city and other cities, determine what should be the rights of individuals. I was

concerned about the constitutional question of whether a man who was a proprietor of a store or a cafe had to serve anybody he wanted to, or did he have the right just to refuse anybody! And it's a basic question that bothered all people. I felt that this ought to be a local matter. I had so campaigned more or less on the states' rights basis, I suppose you'd term it.

When I got here and this bill came up, I read the bill at night. Mrs. Pickle was in Austin. I'd take it home in the evening and read it and I'd debate it with myself. I was coming around to the conclusion that this wasn't as bad a bill as it had been painted in the press. I wrote out a couple of amendments finally that I wanted to offer.

Along about Friday when all the time had run out and I had been attempting to be recognized, I couldn't get the floor because under debate those members who are members of a committee will be recognized, or those who are senior, and I had absolutely no seniority and wasn't on the committee.

F: You weren't senior to very many people, were you?

P: I was senior to no one, so I couldn't get the floor. Finally when they did agree that all debate would be concluded within an hour, those people who wanted to speak of course had to have their chance, and I stood up and was allotted, I believe, two minutes for my amendments. I'll always remember when I arose to offer them I knew my time was so limited that I couldn't debate them very long, so I offered to vote them "in bloc," and Speaker, at

the time, said that would be agreeable if no one objected. But then I added, "Mr. Speaker, I want them voted on separately," and of course I couldn't offer them in bloc and have them voted on separately. We got involved in a parliamentary snarl and the Speaker was just bluntly overruling me, which he was correct in doing.

But I remember Congressman William Colmer, chairman of the Rules Committee, finally arose and went down the aisle and "Now, Mr. Speaker, this gentleman is making his maiden speech in the Congress. We have just met him and have become acquainted with him within the last thirty days, and I don't know of any young man who has come here that we've been more impressed with. I think it is very important that we hear what this young man has to say and that we give him the privilege of separating his amendments and extend to him the courtesies that we would any young legislator in whose views we're interested." He went on at length in his southern, courteous drawl, and finally the Speaker did separate the amendments. I offered them one minute for each. They were, of course, voted down by a bang of the gavel and that was it.

That was my first experience of offering any kind of amendment.

F: Had you checked these out with any of the White House staff or were you just acting entirely independently?

P: No. The White House staff had not been calling me, they had kept their distance because I assume they felt I was wrestling with my

conscience, and so we had no liaison on that point at all. I offered them because I thought they ought to be offered, but they were voted down. Incidentally, both of the amendments later were put into the bill in the Senate; they were corrected and put in there because they were basically good. But at that time and at that hour, the House was accepting nothing, because you couldn't have debate. About all you could do was offer it and have a voice vote. Of course, they were voted down.

Mr. Colmer came up to me on the back rail right after that vote and he said: "Now, Mr. Pickle, don't feel badly about that vote. These men don't mean any affront to you individually. You will find that these men will become your dearest friends, no matter from whence you have come or what you have done before. These men will be dear, dear friends and will mean more to you than any other group of people you've ever known or will know in your life. Collectively and as a group, they are just great people. But I want to tell you this. Individually, you remember, they are a lot more interested in what happens in their district than what happens in yours." I've thought about that many a time, and how true it was. So I thought it was a good bit of advice.

F: I also think that you could just about be elected in Mississippi.

P: Well, I didn't sound exactly like Colmer, but he was slow and deliberate and very courtly and very hardheaded, most of these things, but a wonderful person.

We went ahead and we did vote on the bill, and the Civil Rights Act passed. I voted for the 1964 Civil Rights bill. I think I was one of about six southerners who did in all the South.

F: I was proud of you.

P: Claude Pepper of Florida and I believe Charlie Weltner of Georgia, Carl Albert in Oklahoma, and I believe four of us from Texas, Albert Thomas, Jack Brooks, [Henry] Gonzalez and myself. So there were about six from the whole South. Of course that caused a flood of mail later, four or five hundred letters from all over my district, bitter, bitter denunciations of me.

But the point I remember, and the point of this whole story, was that after the civil rights vote, Tiger Teague had invited me to come down to the Rotunda to have a drink or coffee or something, with a group of people. He told me to come down. "The Rotunda," he said, "is right past the tunnel, right past the underpass. In back of the Capitol you turn right." I did go down New Jersey and and tried to find it, and I went straight ahead and went and went. I finally walked almost to the Potomac River and had to double back another three or four blocks until somebody finally pointed out the Rotunda. Tiger had forgotten to tell me that the "underpass" was under the ground, that I couldn't see it.

F: It's kind of up an alley anyhow.

P: And it is off, down below the Hill in sort of a half-alley.

When I came back to the Coronet Hotel, where I was staying, I

guess it must have been one o'clock in the morning, the man at the desk said, "The White House is calling you." I said, "Fine, give me the slip and I'll call in the morning." "No, sir, they said they wanted you to call when you came in." I said, "It's one or one-thirty now." He said, "I don't know, but they've called back two or three times and said it didn't matter when you came in, to call, it was important!" I said, "All right, I'll call."

So I went up to the room and called. Sure enough, the operator said, "Yes, Congressman, we've been trying to find you everywhere. Just a minute." I didn't know who was calling. Well, it was President Johnson. He said, "I've been trying to locate you. I've located nearly everybody in Washington, but I can get hold of the Pope a lot quicker than I can find you. Where have you been?" I told him. He said, "Well, I ought to know that you've been out somewhere trying to drown that vote, but you ought to be celebrating. I just wanted to say this to you. I'm proud of your vote. I know what you have said, and I know your background, but that was a good vote. As long as you live, you'll be proud of that vote, and I just wanted to tell you. I just couldn't go to sleep tonight until I had a chance to call and tell you as my congressman I was proud of what you did today. I think you'll find it will be a credit to you the rest of your life." Of course that made bumps come all over me. I've thought about that conversation many a time, that here was the President of the

United States, with all the burdens on him, at one-thirty or two in the morning insisting that somebody call him just so he could congratulate him on that particular vote.

Throughout my term here, I've never had many contacts on votes as such. All the time Mr. Johnson was president, very seldom did they call and ask me, "We want you to vote for this," or "We insist that you vote for this; you've just got to vote for that." I think they've kind of set me on a shelf and determined they weren't going to try to either pressure or oversell or undersell me, and that my own conscience would dictate when I could. I felt sure they realized that it would not be good with my constituents if I voted carte blanche with everything that the administration was doing. I think they also felt that I was a Democrat and would support most of these things and would give them support in the crunches, and I tried to follow that.

I think the only time I ever really disappointed them was when they wanted a vote on rent supplement. I had already made commitments to people,after I had studied it, that I didn't think that was a good approach and I didn't think it was the best under the circumstances and told them I wouldn't support it. Then when Jack Valenti at the White House called and just insisted that we give him a vote because it was going to be a close one, I wrestled over and over with my conscience to determine what I could do. I didn't vote for it, because I had already told others that I would not. I guess that vote worried me as much as any I ever cast because I knew

they needed the vote, I knew I should vote for them, no matter what my individual views in my particular situation.

F: You were kind of caught there between a rock and a hard place.

P: But then having promised other people, particularly some real estate people who were dear friends of mine, and we had talked about it and analyzed it and I had come to a conclusion and told them what I'd do, I didn't feel like I was in a position to change a vote, even for the President. But it bothered me and worried me and I couldn't sleep well. My wife fretted with me for three or four nights afterwards and insisted that I go to another room and sleep. She said, "You won't let me sleep." But those things bothered me.

Generally speaking, though, the people at the White House never did "twist my arm." All the men up here tease me about Pickle being "a rubber stamp" or his arm being twisted, that was not so.

F: Did you feel that being from Johnson's home district hampered you or gave you a little special attention, little extra tenseness, or made no difference at all?

P: It gave me a lot of attention because all the members in Congress--

F: I suppose everyone kind of watched your vote.

P: They would watch my vote. They referred to me as "This is President Johnson's congressman." It was always put that way. I would always say publicly that no, I wasn't his congressman; he was my constituent. The President didn't always see the humor in that approach, but the members were always teasing me, both sides of the aisle, and even now with him having been out nearly four years, they still

introduce me as, "This is President Johnson's congressman." So naturally they watched my vote, and also some of my own delegation would watch my vote because, if it was a close vote, they also felt, I believe, that I was trying to vote my convictions. I'm neither far right nor left and because of that, sometime my vote has been looked at as being objective. At least I hope so.

F: Do you think you got more mail because of the fact that you did come from the Tenth District?

P: You mean mail in general?

F: Yes.

P: Yes, oh yes.

F: Particularly on votes? "Why did you do that for President Johnson," or "You're just a Johnson captive"?

P: A great many of them said, "Of course, just write if off as a foregone conclusion that Pickle doesn't have a right to cast his own vote, so naturally he's just going to endorse everything."

F: "He's not our representative, he's Johnson's."

P: Always the ratings would be such that it would show my voting to be fairly independent, but I was already just written off by a lot of my friends that I was Johnson's and had to vote that way.

My mail was heavy the first years here, extremely heavy. One, because I was from Austin, the President's district, and anytime anybody wanted something they thought they had to go through me instead of their own congressman. I constantly had to try to shove these requests off to others, although other delegations, both Texas

and other states, would come to me with requests. "Will you tell the President?" "Will you tell them down at the White House?" My mail was heavy. I suppose that's true of almost any new man, but when you're a new man and if you've come from the President's district and you're a lifelong friend of his, it will just be heavier.

I had another factor enter into it; that is, I had campaigned for some ten or fifteen years at different periods either for President Johnson or for Governor Allan Shivers or for Price Daniel. I had covered the state, and I probably knew more county managers or county leaders or precinct chairmen or county Democratic chairmen, leading bankers and politicos, if you want to call them that--

F: Plus newspapermen.

P: --and newspapermen, than anybody in Texas. At that time I knew fully as many as anybody, and maybe more. I had been to all kinds of conventions and through all sorts of elections, and I had made some dear friends. Now that I was elected and here in this seat, they would offer to cash in some of their chips on me; that is, they'd say, "Will you do this?". And so I had a lot of requests for appointments to see people here or appointments to office or requests, or "Will you vote this," or "Will you handle this." That was a natural thing. But my mail was, I believe, twice as heavy my first two or three years here as other members comparable to me.

F: Did you have the staff to accommodate it, or did everybody just double up?

P: No, not at all. We doubled up. By habit we try to answer every letter, so our mail load always has been heavier than the average congressman. A lot of them take the letter and just say, fine, and they'll file it away. But we always respond.

F: Coming from a state capital, you're with a heavily politicized group anyhow that think in political terms so much more than they might in Muleshoe.

P: They not only think that way, they respond accordingly. They write or they call. You see, Austin is the capital, and has some seventy-five major trade associations and organizations with their headquarters centered there. Usually that trade association, though their president may come from any part of Texas, will pick up the phone and call Austin and say to Austin, "You write or you call Congressman Pickle and say,"quote." So even today my mail is heavier just because we're sort of the trade center, the state center, and we get a lot of that correspondence that others don't. It's good and bad, but it's sort of a pressure point that always has to be bubbling on us.

F: Incidentally, how did Bob Poage run in this previous primary in your old Williamson County?

P: He hasn't run except in the primary yet. He came along fine. I suppose he carried a vote of better than two to one in Williamson County, maybe a little better. About the same kind of vote that I had carried and that Mr. Johnson had carried. Well, years ago, Mr. Johnson used to carry it heavier than that because there wouldn't be opposition and his vote would be a higher percentage.

Each year the percentages close a little. But Congressman Poage carried the county big. You see, he had had some association with Williamson County over the years because of his closeness through Bell County. Also, he had the city of Bartlett. Bartlett's split on the county line between Williamson and Bell counties. Poage has come into the district many times, held many meetings there. The strength of the Williamson County economy, as far as that Taylor-east end district is concerned, is based on agriculture, and he's the chairman of the House Agriculture Committee. So he ran very well.

F: Okay. Do you often agonize over votes like that, like you did on civil rights?

P: Normally, no. I suppose all of us agonize--

F: I mean, I'm sure some votes are just perfunctory because they don't really touch you.

P: The close votes, any man, I suppose, worries about them. I look back on votes and usually they'll fade away into the background and you wonder later why you worried so very much about a particular bill. Most of the time, though, you can finally make up your mind before you cast it, or if you take a position ahead of time and say, "This is it," I find that's better than being torn with indecision. The ones that really worry you, the one that you can't seem to quite make up your mind on because there are pluses and minuses on both sides and you finally cast it, they do worry you. Most of the time, though, I think the members after having voted it, after having defended it then later, in writing or in correspondence, come

to the conclusion that that was what they'd done and there was no point in trying to go back and rewrite or replay it.

F: You don't look back much?

P: Not much. I don't think I've looked back on any of them. I don't think it's a good thing to look back on your votes. I have in one instance, and I've worried about my vote. I think of the thousands of votes, if we've had that many, on amendments and bills since I've been here, I don't think I would change a one except one particular vote. If I had my chance, I would certainly vote differently because that one has worried me and bothered me. That was the one on open housing. I voted against the Open Housing Act on final passage, and I have never been satisfied or proud of myself. It was one of these things that's very, very emotional, and very few people from the South voted for it.

F: It's awfully hard, too, now to recreate the climate that you had then.

P: No way to. It was so intense. I voted for the rule; that is someone from the White House had called and wanted to know how I could vote. I told them that I had pretty much made commitments to vote against the bill itself in final passage. They asked if I could vote for the rule, and their reasoning was that if we could get the rule and could pass the rule, then we'll pass the bill by a big margin.

F: What do you mean, vote for the rule?

P: Each bill has a rule. Before the bill is presented, it has to be debated under certain conditions in accordance with the rule that

granted it. In this particular case, the rule was a closed rule, as I recall it, and you couldn't amend it. You were either going to vote it up or down. The argument was to vote against the rule so that you could offer amendments and then try to change it and correct it, or defeat it. I voted against opening it up, I voted for the rule, which meant that if it passed, then the bill would likely pass. And the rule did pass and the vote then did receive fifty votes more than on the rule vote. The argument generally offered by the Republicans and by the conservative Democrats was "Let's open this thing up so we can amend it." The bill generally though was set where you'd either be for it or against it. I voted for the rule to give them a chance to bring it up and in effect to pass it, and that's what they asked me to do. They said, "If you'll do that, that'll be fine." So I did that and made it possible for the bill to be brought up and, in effect, to be passed. And it was a very narrow vote. But if I were to do it over again, I'd vote against the rule so that everybody could have a chance to amend it, and then vote for it on final passage. I should have voted for the open housing bill. Other people may not feel that way, but it was inevitable that we must have the open housing, that is, the rights of individuals to buy and live wherever they can buy; there cannot be these deed restrictions. It's a far step we took in that always before we'd said that a man owns his own property, from the bowels of the earth to the sky in heaven, and he could do with his own property what he wanted to. He could sell it to whomever he wanted to or not sell it. That's so

basic that it's hard to get around the argument of it. Well, you can still do that, "so long as there's not discrimination in the sale," and that's a fair addition or interpretation to put on it. So, that's just one vote that, out of all the votes that I've cast, if I could change, I'd switch my vote. Instead of giving them the vote on the rule so they could pass it, which in effect I was doing, I believe my conscience and history would judge me better had I voted against the rule and for the bill on final passage. That's what some of them did. That bothers me. That's about the only one.

Otherwise, I don't think the average member looks back and tries to second-guess or redo or recreate. One, time erases those pressures and the scene passes and the pressures and emotions of that time are gone; and, secondly, another item arises the next hour, another crisis is upon you immediately and the pressure of the new one makes you forget the old. That's life, and the way it ought to be. Otherwise, you could worry and have these torments bouncing around in your mind so much that you could never get any rest, particularly when you have to cast these votes over and over and over and over. People seem to think you have a lot of time, that you're a congressman and you live the "life of Riley," and you're a big shot and you just kind of vote around and float around. The truth of the matter is the demands on you are extremely heavy and you've got to go from this point to the next point at a fast pace. Time is not given to you to go too much into depth on things and certainly not

to look back.

F: And you all must, when you're talking about something, feel sort of halfway inadequate, because you would have liked to have had three days alone just to study it and you'll never get it.

P: On nearly every vote, that's the case. You have to come on the floor and say, "What's the vote?" "Oh, yes." And you remember your own briefing from your staff and others, but still you have to pretty much depend on either your friends or your committee or your "side" to give you good balance or good clearance steering. Because, otherwise, no one man, no man, can be so briefed that he knows all about legislation when it passes.

F: On something like the Open Accommodations Act, which you voted for after some agony, do you now get a kind of quiet satisfaction when you go into some very conservative community like, oh, we'll say the Fredonia Hotel in Nacogdoches and see blacks registering with confidence and just as naturally as [can be]? Do you feel like "Well, I had a hand in that"?

P: Always. Not so much as in going to places like that, but when I go down the streets and I see people shopping, when I see the blacks driving cars and I can see them in meeting in churches, I just have an inward feeling that that was the right vote and it gives you a great deal of satisfaction. I've said over and over again that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was the best vote I ever cast. Some of my conservative friends would never agree with me, of course, but it was a proud moment.

F: I think the tide, the long tide, was with you.

Do you have anything to add to that Connally-Yarborough feud?

P: It's all involved, and I don't really--

F: Is the feud two-sided? We will admit that Yarborough has been pretty badly bruised at times, and therefore he's always looking over his shoulder. He's sometimes looking over his shoulder when there's nobody chasing him.

P: I'm afraid that's right.

F: I have wondered sometimes if he felt the feud more than Connally did.

P: I don't think it ever bothered Connally particularly at the beginning. He was going forward and working for Mr. Johnson at the time. I don't think it sweated Connally. But Senator Yarborough is the type of man that a lot of these things fed on him. He would conjure up a conspiracy or a plot that wasn't there. I think probably that attitude caused the feud to grow and grow.

At one point Connally and Yarborough could have gotten together; I don't think Connally was trying to develop a feud. When Connally first became governor, I think we recalled men who tried to get the parties together and Yarborough said no, he wouldn't do that. I think that broke the straw right there more than anything else. And then it was inevitable that they would go their own way.

F: In 1964 did you have any particular insight in the maneuvering to get an opponent for Yarborough and Johnson's more or less eliminating any opposition?

P: I was just somewhat familiar with the story that did take place.

F: You were just another high-class citizen in this case?

P: In this instance, yes. I was just watching. I think it's foregone, though, that Congressman Joe Kilgore had decided to run for the Senate. He had even confided to some of his friends at the White House that this was so. He had met with Connally and they had agreed that Joe would run and they would help each other. It was not an anti-Yarborough vote so much at that point as it was that friends will be friends and Joe Kilgore, who had had some ten years of service here and it had been outstanding service, just decided he'd run. I don't think any of the delegation, either up here or other places, was trying to just get someone to run against Senator Yarborough for the point of just being opposed to him. I think it was more a question of being for Kilgore. I was here as a congressman and knew that these things had taken place, I knew that Joe had talked to the White House, I knew that he'd talked to leading state officials. And at that point, I don't believe anybody had intervened or had been a party to building up an opponent for Senator Yarborough. It was just something that was being generated, as you will find, within a party. I think probably what happened was that the people who were depending on Mr. Johnson as president to keep his program moving forward, particularly the labor leaders and those associated with them, had determined that although Kilgore was a very able man and an outstanding man, his record on such things as civil rights or liberal votes was a great deal different from theirs, and his record was so clear that if he was elected they knew that

they could not get "14-B repealed," or these other things. I think they finally probably just said to Mr. Johnson, "You cannot do this. If you support Kilgore, everything that we are hoping for is gone. It's not a personal matter with us, it's just that his philosophies and his votes would always be against us. If your own senator is going to be against you, you wouldn't have anybody up in the Senate, with Tower on one side. Then the whole program is lost." I think Mr. Johnson finally decided he could not support Joe, although he'd liked him very much as an individual. He was personally very fond of Joe and his wife Janey and their family. Joe had campaigned for him back in 1941 in the special election when he was a senior at the University of Texas. He had worked for him in Austin, and so they were good friends, individually and personally. But I think Mr. Johnson probably made the big decision that from a national standpoint he could not support Joe and had to support Yarborough because Yarborough was already there. If it was a new race, if they were both running for the same office from scratch, that would be one thing, but here was a man, Yarborough, who voted for Johnson's programs, who voted for the Democratic programs, who was an outstanding spokesman and was one of the "darlings" of the liberal labor group. And rightly so. Here he was, asking for re-election, and if the President of the United States who had to carry forward these programs was voting against that man in favor of a "conservative," the whole national party could not understand it and could not accept it.

When Mr. Johnson made the statement that he would have to support Senator Yarborough, I think this was the decisive factor in Joe's decision not to run. He felt that if his own president was repudiating him, the man in the White House that he had worked for, that he would withhold money and funds and friends and it would be a mean and bitter fight and it just wasn't worth it. So Joe withdrew.

History alone can write that one. I think Kilgore has since then felt that it was probably the best thing that ever happened to him, as a lot of these things are blessings. He went back to Texas and he has gotten himself well established in the law practice, he's the leading man in their law firm. He has done well financially and been appointed to the Board of Regents of the University of Texas.

F: He has been a good regent.

P: He's just an outstanding individual in every sense of the word, but he has had time with his family and I think probably he has had a better life because of it. I teased him afterwards, I said, "Don't you want to come back?" He said, "No, thank you, I wouldn't trade at all. I've had ten years of that life and I know what it's like."

But an interesting thing about that though, all over the years Mr. Johnson felt bad about the position he was put in; I feel sure that he didn't want it that way. Politically he felt that it had to be and he decided accordingly. But he has always tried to be friendly to the Kilgores. He has invited them to the White House, he has invited them to come up to see them, he has invited them up to the Ranch. And generally the differences have kind of eased off.

Mrs. Kilgore, as women are wont to do, I don't think will ever forgive President Johnson. She felt that, through Walter Jenkins or whoever Joe had talked with in the White House--maybe the President--there was the understanding Joe was going to run, that he [President Johnson] should not have taken that action, he should have just kept neutral about it. She felt very strongly about it then, and I think still does, not so much on an individual basis but just somebody did her wrong and she wasn't going to forgive, and I doubt she has.

But President Johnson, I remember, years later nominated Joe as a brigadier general in the Air Force Reserve. I don't say he went out of his way, but he made a point, if he had a chance to raise Joe up, he'd do it because he wanted Joe's friendship and his respect and his love. He didn't make that other decision because he was against Joe but because he was placed in a very difficult political spot.

Now how he feels about it, you'd better talk to the President.

F: Yes. How active were you in the campaign of 1964? You've got your own fish to fry.

P: Yes. I did not travel over the country, wasn't asked to. It was one of these type of campaigns that was carrying its own momentum. It was a pretty foregone conclusion that we were going to be successful, and therefore we didn't have "storm troopers" or special groups traveling into all of these various congressional districts. So I pretty much worked within my own congressional district, as did most of the Texas delegation, and that was all that was expected of us. We would visit with Mr. Johnson in between stops or at the Ranch and

go with him on some trips, but for the most part I confined my activities to Texas.

F: Was he pretty confident, or was he so eager that he was seeing all the pitfalls instead of the successes?

P: One, I think he was very confident. He wanted to win, but what he really wanted, as he has in all of his campaigns, he wanted to win big. He felt that winning big was important. If you just win and get by, then the next time somebody else will be after you. Or if you just win and get by, what you advance legislatively speaking will be looked at with suspicion or, as an expression, from a weak source. So he wanted to win big. He had just come in to the presidency and he had only had one year in office, and he was on trial. With all his heart, he was trying to win, and win big. That was his only concern: how big would he win! Otherwise, I don't think he ever doubted that he was going to win or the outcome of it, just how big. When he literally swept the United States heavier than any presidential election almost since Roosevelt's days, that gave him a great source of satisfaction. And with him, he brought in men from other parts of the country who came into office at the same time.

Now that election and the election of a Democratic Congress, plus the basic knowledge that Mr. Johnson had about legislation through years of experience here, gave him the formula for a successful legislative push.

F: Formula and momentum.

P: And momentum. Beginning in 1965 we got bills introduced and passed. The years of 1965, 1966, 1967, that period, but primarily the year of

1966, the Congress of the United States passed more progressive, far-reaching, significant legislation than had ever been enacted in any presidential term, I suppose, in the history of the United States. So he had the right climate, the country had confidence in Mr. Johnson totally, but most of all, that man knew how to get legislation through. He'd been in the House, he'd been in the Senate, he'd been in the key position, he knew nearly every congressman and senator, he knew what they liked and what they didn't like and he knew how to appeal to them, he knew how to work at it. Contrary to almost any president I've ever heard of, he was on the phone constantly, talking to members of the House and the Senate. He just wouldn't send his aides. It would be nothing for him to talk to fifteen, twenty, or thirty different congressmen or senators during a day about some matter.

F: That's time-consuming.

P: Time-consuming. He'd spend hours on it. His working day was probably fourteen to fifteen hours, just constantly talking to individuals. He could call the senator up by the first name and say, "Why can't you do this? Can you help me? I need this." And he'd appeal to them individually. His staff would appeal to them individually. He had a rule down there that if any congressman or senator calls in, you call him within the next ten minutes, or else! I've never gotten a call from the President of the United States since Mr. Nixon has been in. I doubt that very few people on the Hill have ever gotten a call from the President [Nixon]. He just doesn't do it.

I don't believe he does it. Now whether that's good or bad, history can only write. But it shows that Mr. Johnson would push in a particular legislation and he knew all about it, knew how it works, why it ought to pass, and he had the argument for it.

I tell you, Johnson can be awfully persuasive. He's about the best close-in, eyeball salesman that you'll run across. When he's pushing particular legislation, it's an all-out push, don't leave any stone unturned, and he would do his own homework.

F: Would he bring people down to the White House to talk with him?

P: Just all during the day and night. He'd have them down there for individual conferences, to swim, to eat; he'd have them down for bill-signing ceremonies. He'd always get them up on the front row and he'd compliment the authors and all those who were co-authors and put on a big show. I don't think Mr. Nixon has had a single bill-signing ceremony there. Just different style, different approaches. Johnson's was the individual approach.

F: You could be sure you'd get your picture in your home district, couldn't you?

P: Every way that you wanted it. He'd also call the congressmen down for briefings sessions at the White House. He would have them in groups, small and large. If he was talking about Vietnam or if he was talking about civil rights, or if he was talking about budget, financial matters, he'd know more about the budget and the economic picture than Charlie Schultze or Walter Heller.

F: Or the chairman of the committee.

P: Or the chairman of the committee. He knew the answers. He's a brilliant man and he'd study it and he'd know. So when he was talking to you about something, he wasn't just making general statements and hoping you'd swallow it. He was selling! And he sold. That's why the year 1966 primarily and through that period will always be considered as probably the most productive in the history of the United States. And history will record that. We've been so imbued with the Vietnam problem that a great many Americans forget when these great things did take place. They took place in the Lyndon Johnson Administration, and history will record that, I think.

F: At these briefing sessions, were they monologues or was there some give and take? Could you have said, "Well, Mr. President, I've got this sort of deviation from what you want and here's why"?

P: They were not monologues, but he was the center, he was the performer. He was on center stage. He would ask questions and ask for questions and members would express themselves, but not many would stand up and oppose him. The Republicans would always have somebody posted, by agreement, to ask a tormenting or negative question. By and large, though, Mr. Johnson could spot the question the moment it was asked and could answer real quick and get right on to the next one.

He brought people into it, but even so, he was the overpowering influence of any briefing. And the congressmen wanted it that way. They reveled in his performance because they knew that he knew what he was talking about.

F: It also probably gave them arguments to use on their own constituents.

P: That's true. When he was arguing on a particular bill or matter, let's say he'd talk ten minutes, but as he talked about it he'd draw analogies about other bills and other individuals. And all through his audience he was looking at senators and congressmen and he'd mention Congressman Boggs or he'd mention Carl Albert or he'd mention Tip O'Neill or he'd mention somebody else by name. He'd refer to them. He'd give little personal attentions all through the audience in, say, a ten minute discourse. The men felt like that they were being recognized, that he knew that they were there, and though they didn't say anything, they felt like they were part of it, you see. Just a little personal recognition.

F: You're a special case, but did he make some effort, despite his great involvements, to get to know some of the younger congressmen?

P: Yes. We didn't do enough of that though. He would bring them down and insist that his staff have people down at the White House mess for lunch. He tried his best. I remember he'd say to me at different times, "Now, you or Jack Brooks, some of you all, ought to get a group of young people down here. Pick out twenty young men to come down. We'll have a meeting with them regularly, anytime you want to set one up. I'll meet with them some evening. We never really did do that. He made the offer to me two or three times. He said, "Now it won't hurt you, and it'll give us a chance to all get to know each other better."

I should have done more of it, there's no question, all of us should have. But everybody gets so busy that it's hard to get a group together.

F: Yes, it takes a little organizational effort.

P: He made more of an effort to try to know the young people than some of us did.

President Johnson was one who really wanted to know individuals. That's his strength. When he could get in close with you and talk to you and visit with you, you immediately knew that he understood the problem, he was familiar with the issues, he had the answers, and he was thoroughly convinced about a position. That'll sell you! He likes to talk individually and always would try to get us down there in groups or as individuals.

I think some of the most pleasant recollections during the time that he was there were the many visits we'd get to make. Mrs. Pickle and I were privileged to go to the White House many, many times during his term there, not for the purpose of discussing legislation although inevitably these things would come up and there'd be some talk or analyzing or some banter or conversation about it, but that wasn't the purpose. Usually after a long day, quite often the President and Mrs. Johnson would want to eat in the family room, and if the daughters weren't there, he likes company. He doesn't like to eat by himself and won't eat by himself. He has got to have a group around him. He'll call you to have somebody there to visit with him nearly every time. We used to go down an awful lot of times, sometimes maybe two or three times a week just to have dinner in the family room upstairs in the White House, maybe to play cards with Mrs. Johnson if they wanted to, or to go and bowl, but mainly just to talk and visit and kind of relax and finish off the day. It wasn't for the purpose of saying, "Now, you go back on the Hill and

do that." It was just company with friends, that's all.

I liked to be around him, thoroughly enjoyed it, and I think he was always relaxed. I always made a policy that whatever he said in meetings like that would never get quoted by me. I can knock on wood today, after six years there and twenty-five or thirty years of relationship with him, I've never gone out and talked and discussed things. Not that you're trying to hide something, but it's just so easily could be misunderstood or be misquoted. The man who's always dropping names and trying to talk big pretty soon gets out of that circle, people would usually say, "He'll talk too much." I think Mr. Johnson always felt that I wasn't going to be misquoting him, and I never did. For that reason we got to go down a lot of times and just be with the family upstairs, outside the family room in the hall, discussing any number of things and laughing about events that had happened in a period of twenty-five years that by indirection would be just enough an ease to relieve the pressure. And I think it also worked in reverse for him.

For instance, during the Tet offensive in 1967, 1968, when we thought we were getting close to maybe having this thing brought to a head and might get Vietnam behind us, but they started the big Tet offensive. Of course the whole world was watching and waiting with bated breath, watching to see what would happen. During that time, I suppose the one week which determined whether the Tet offensive would be successful or not, with everybody in the world trying to answer "why is this going on," Mr. Johnson was so involved that

he almost stayed up around the clock for a week's time between the upstairs and his Oval Room or down in the Situation Room. Walt Rostow or the generals from the Pentagon, and others, would be giving him reports day and night about the situation over there. I remember that during that particular time Mr. Johnson would invite some of us to come down and we'd eat, and then we'd play dominoes. His brother Sam Houston would come down from upstairs some; maybe we'd have Congressman Jack Brooks or ICC Commissioner Willard Deason or Marvin Watson, who was on his staff. But those of us who played dominoes loved it, and we came down and we would play dominoes.

The men from the Situation Room would come up and say, "Mr. President, here's a message I think you must see." He'd read it and he'd either show it to us or he'd sit there and talk a little bit, and then he'd say, "You all excuse me." He'd get up and he'd go down below. Then he'd come back up and he'd say in the hale voice, "All right, now, shuffle them up now. You all beat me out of that last hand, let's play again." And we'd play sometimes--

F: Who kept score?

P: I can't even remember the score being kept. He liked to keep score because he could kind of fudge a little bit to tease you, and you'd always say you had to watch him and that was part of his game.

But he would go down to the Situation Room and he'd come back up and we'd play dominoes. We'd play sometimes till twelve or one o'clock in the morning or more. I think one week there we must have been invited down four nights out of the week to play dominoes. But

that was kind of his pressure release. He'd get a message and he'd try to determine what was going to happen and whether we could hold and how successful it would be, but in between times, to do something, he'd say, "Let's play dominoes."

F: Could he come back from one of those decisions and focus on the game?

P: Yes, he'd come back and get pretty much into the game and get involved again. Of course there'd be interruptions constantly.

F: I presume he liked to win at dominoes like he did at everything else.

P: Oh my, how hard he does play! He usually played with A. W. Moursund. They'd have kind of "dog Latin" signals, and they'd do it just to tease the opponents and get them nervous. But oh, he'd put on a big show at a domino game. It's a great game, great contest and it takes a lot of concentration. But you can also play it loosely and get by with it.

I've often thought that that was an odd way--I guess people of America a lot of times wondered, what does a president do when his Army is involved in a life and death struggle, determining whether it can hold and will be successful in our country's endeavor, particularly in a military battle. What does he do! Here was our President, carrying on his work, but in the evening when the heavy hours weigh upon you and the darkness seemed to bring on more fears than the daytime and more worries and apprehensions, here was the President having a few friends down to take a drink, eat, and play

dominoes.

F: I presume that in those sessions, not necessarily TET but all through there when he'd just have you down for a kind of visiting evening and talk would naturally drift to shop, that he mulled all the possibilities in Vietnam rather than just defending one viewpoint.

P: Yes, he was never trying to convince us. He didn't have to convince us.

F: But a lot of his talking, it seems to me, is talking to himself out loud.

P: Yes, that's true. That's a fair appraisal of him. He's not one-sided on it, he's very convinced about his position but he didn't lock himself out on alternatives and the viewpoints of others. But he really wasn't trying to sell us because we generally felt that basically what we were doing was right. And we also knew the man. We knew Johnson. A lot of people have said over the years, "Well, he started this war, he sent all of these American boys over to their death." Johnson ran on the basis that he didn't want this, and did not want to send any American troops over there, was not anxious to. I imagine he has always regretted it--except that any man who is president has got to make a tough decision for his country. He can't make that which is going to be "the popular one." When you occupy that top position, you've got to make the tough decisions. And his decision was that the United States could not be run out of that country, that history could not permit it.

He determined that he had to go in there and give protection to South Vietnam, stop this naked aggression and, as the leader of the free world, give the world that kind of a leadership.

In retrospect, I'm sure he wishes that he'd never gotten involved that deeply in Vietnam. It was not our intention. It was not our design. It did not emanate from the spirit of imperialism or aggression or expansion. I think he just felt that the word of the United States had been given, that we would not permit these things, and the other major powers were challenging. Had we not kept our word, I think he felt it would hurt us all over the world in history because of it.

F: Well, you can't have it both ways, but I've often wondered if he had pulled out and North Vietnam presumably would have overrun South Vietnam, if all the people wouldn't have accused him of ratting on the promises of Eisenhower and Kennedy and so forth, and he would have been linked with another Neville Chamberlain?

P: I'm convinced that would have been the case. At the time, if he'd say, "No, we're going to pull out, we're not going to stand there," 95 per cent of the American people would have literally burned him in effigy and run him out of office, just literally come down with hammer and tongs and torches to attack him as being un-American and weak and not willing to fight for our interests.

Now history and time have changed around to where we're all tired of it. It's inevitable, when you lose men and spend a lot of money, people are going to say "We ought to stop this killing."

But the same people would have literally had his scalp had he pulled out at first. History I think would have treated him a lot worse if he'd gone the other way.

As one individual, I'm convinced that when you read back over this period of time the world will say that the United States acted right. I think we were right in our involvement over there. A lot of people today find it very convenient to say this "miserable war," and "we made the biggest mistake we ever made." Well, other nations and other times are going to be faced with these critical decisions. Who is going to give the leadership? Who is going to keep the peace? The leaders of the world have got to do that. If they don't, then we'll always be engaged in these wars, and hopefully we can see the time when that will disappear.

F: Did he ever talk to you about your running for the Senate--your running against Tower?

P: Not really. He has always teased me about it. He said, "You could be elected senator. You ought to think about that." But, you see, he had Senator Yarborough there.

F: He pretty well kept hands off Tower, didn't he? He just accepted him as a fact?

P: Tower was elected in 1961, I wasn't in the picture then, I had just been elected. The next time up, I had not been there for more than two years when Tower was up for re-election again. There wasn't time to challenge because I hadn't been here long enough. I think too Johnson would have felt like, I guess he did, that I would

have been termed "LBJ's little boy," and he might have been in the position of being defensive. He and Senator Tower got along all right individually, he didn't have any problem with him. Tower didn't vote with him a great deal of the time, but he was also a Texan and I think they had a pleasant relationship. So Johnson was never trying to get him replaced. But anyway Tower's election came up during only one time of Johnson and we weren't really set for--

F: It was really premature then.

P: Yes.

F: And you didn't consider it in 1972?

P: No.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview VI]

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